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SUBJECT: KOLKATA QUIET, TASLIMA NASREEN FORCED TO LEAVE

REF: KOLKATA 356

¶1. (U) Kolkata has remained quiet since rioting on November 21 by Muslim protestors required the Indian Army to be called in and a curfew imposed until the early morning of November 22. However, the Army is still deployed in central Kolkata as a precautionary measure. The November 21 violence started during a three-hour demonstration called by the All India Minority Forum (AIMF) to protest the recent Nandigram violence and to demand cancellation of Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen's Indian visa.

¶2. (U) The day after the violence, Nasreen, who had stirred controversy in Bangladesh with her critiques of Islam in her novels and essays, left Kolkata for the city of Jaipur in Rajasthan. She had been living in exile in India and Kolkata for nearly 13 years on a valid Indian visa after a fatwa was issued against her in Bangladesh. Media reported that her departure was facilitated by GOWB officials and local businessmen. After staying a night in Jaipur, Nasreen purportedly traveled to New Delhi.

¶3. (U) On November 23, Kolkata businesses and schools reopened in areas that were hit by the protests, as the Indian Army joined local police in patrolling the streets. The police have arrested 68 people so far in connection with the violence and W. Bengal Chief Minister Bhattacharjee has ordered an inquiry into the incident. AIMF chief and Congress member Idris Ali - the primary organizer of the protest -- claimed his plans for the demonstration never included violence. He blamed "outside" elements for the violence, and said he himself was baffled by the turn of events. (Note: Ali is not a popular leader and his meetings usually show poor attendance. End Note.) Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (JUH) leader Siddiqullah Chowdhury, who also said he had nothing to do with the Muslim mob attack, condemned Ali for his lack of control over participants in the protest. Observers said that a range of local Muslims cutting across political affiliations, including supporters of Trinamul Congress General Secretary Sultan Ahmed, Milli Ittehad Parishad (a conglomerate of 12 Muslim organizations) and the JUH-backed People's Democratic Conference of India participated in the violence. Some leaders, including Ali, were arrested and later released.

¶4. (U) Comment: People in Kolkata were clearly shaken by the sudden violence that shut down parts of the city, and the Communists, who pride themselves on their secular politics, were no exception. The Communists decided that maintaining law and order took precedence over defending Nasreen and the principle freedom of speech. In 2003, the Left Front had banned her book "Dwikhandita" (Split in Two) over concerns that it could cause communal tension. In August 2007, Nasreen came under attack by Muslims legislators from the Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen party during a book lecture in Hyderabad, and was saved only when lecture organizers stepped in front of her to protect her from the attackers. That she found initial shelter in Rajasthan, a

state governed by the BJP, shows the political irony -- temporarily sheltering Nasreen gives the BJP some moral high ground to use against the Communists and the Muslim community.

JARDINE